



European Youth Forum
Position on the

Future of European Union Funding
for Youth NGOs

Adopted at the Council of Members
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Le dynamisme du tissu associatif est un élément fondamental de l'équilibre et de la vigueur de la démocratie. Ces (...) associations (...) sont à tous les niveaux de la société, les aiguillons irremplaçables des institutions (...). Elles sont le lieu privilégié où s'exprime la démocratie de proximité, (...) le foyer qui permet à l'initiative individuelle de s'exprimer avec efficacité dans des ensembles restreints, une formidable école de la citoyenneté responsabilisée et accessible à tous.

Nicole Fontaine, Former President of the European Parliament, quoted in "Associations and Emerging Europe / Le Associations et l'europe en devenir"¹

¹ La Documentation Française, Paris 2001, page 123/124

Considerations:

EU SUPPORT TO YOUTH NGO'S AT CROSSROADS

Youth NGOs represented in the European Youth Forum, understand that the relationship between the EU and young people active in civil society is at an important crossroads: The Laeken Declaration, the White Papers on governance and on youth, the reform of the Union's budget and the revision of the Financial Regulation are factors that will impact the networks and associations that young people have formed on European level. We recognise both the challenges and opportunities.

We believe that the direction which the discussions on these topics will take is going to impact strongly the organisations we represent and the relationship of young people and the European Union. This is why we wish to contribute to the discussions revolving around these issues, and sincerely hope that our contribution will be taken into account, namely by the Commission, the Parliament and the Council.

We believe that if Europe is to be build with the young citizens, the question of how youth NGOs are supported in the coming years is crucial. The institutions will have to make a choice on the sustainability, the quality and quantity of its support and the nature of its criteria for that support. Youth NGOs expect that the support is based on a full recognition of our role and nature within European democracy, and that the support is both sufficient and sustainable.

In brief:

THE DEMANDS OF THE EUROPEAN YOUTH FORUM

- Recognising the Nature and specific Value of Youth NGOs:

The EU needs to recognise the specific nature of International Youth NGOs: their bottom-up nature, their heavy reliance on voluntary work, their high turn-over (of staff and volunteers), their value for non-formal learning of young people (both in structures and activities), that they are arenas that allow for a value-based expression of active citizenship.

Grants should be given primarily to organisations that are engaging young people in all aspects of their activities. Organisations supported should be made up of member organisations that are open to young people regardless of their status or background (as long as they agree to the aims and values of the organisation).

- EU Funding for Youth NGOs in the years to come:

Grants provided by the EU to International Non-Governmental Youth NGOs (INGYOs) should at least amount to 10 000 Euro each and provide an average support of 20 000 Euro in order to be effective and proportionate to the considerable work input on the side of the applicants and the Commission. The budget line A-3029 should therefore be raised to 2 million Euro in the 2003 budget.

A specific programme in support of Youth Organisations should be established to replace the support currently provided by the A-30 lines of the EU Budget. This programme should be allocated a minimum of 5 million Euro per year (and cover both the support for INGYOs and the Youth Forum).

- Reliable Support for a Sustainable Civil Society:

Funding for Youth NGOs must be sustainable and should not be limited to start-up support. Supporting the associations of young people at European level must be considered as of general European interest. Decreasing grants annually will not contribute to reinforcing European civil society and would weaken the links between the European Union and its citizens.

Introduction:

BUILDING EUROPE WITH ITS YOUNG CITIZENS

It has become widely acknowledged that there is a “widening gulf between the European Union and the people it serves.”² More recently the Laeken Declaration has identified it as one of the three main challenges for the EU in the coming years to address the question “how to bring citizens, and primarily the young, closer to the European design and the European institutions”³. On the one hand side, reforming the institutions is important to improve accountability, effectiveness, openness and participation. On the other hand it is important to recognise that the institutions cannot overcome the problem of scepticism towards the EU, its objectives and its current institutional setting unilaterally.

The European Commission has recognised the role non-governmental organisations play in “giving voice to the concerns of citizens.”⁴ This is not of minor importance and it is relevant to bear in mind that in complex and diverse societies, democratic participation of citizens – going beyond the sole participation in elections – is hardly imaginable on a purely individual basis, and thus the freedom of association is central to any democratic order. While Article 12 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights⁵ recognises this right, it is regrettable that the current primary law of the EU does not make reference to civic associations and their role in the cultural and democratic heritage of Europe. The widening gap between the Union and its citizens can only be overcome by more participation of the citizens and a greater recognition of the expression of citizens’ beliefs, convictions and interests through plural and diverse voluntary organisations.

The White Paper on youth⁶ identifies participation of young people as a priority, and the Council welcomed this in its first reaction to the White Paper.⁷ The Council also recognised – so far more on a declaratory basis than by concrete action – the voluntary engagement of young citizens in NGOs.⁸

2 European Governance – A White Paper, COM (2001) 428 final, OJ C 287, 12.10.2001

3 European Council 14-15 December 2001, Laeken Declaration on the Future of the European Union, Annex 1 to the Presidency Conclusions, p. 21

4 European Governance – A White Paper, COM (2001) 428 final, OJ C 287, 12.10.2001

5 OJ C 364/1, 18.12.2000

6 COM (2001) 681

7 Council Conclusions on the follow-up of the Commission White Paper entitled “A new Impetus for European Youth”.

8 Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council of 14 February 2002 on the added value of voluntary activity for young people in the context of the development of Community action on youth; OJ C 50/3, 23.02.2002

RECOGNISING THE NATURE AND SPECIFIC VALUE OF YOUTH NGO'S

Young people involved in youth organisations at European level are faced with a paradoxical situation: on the one hand side, youth organisations across Europe have formed international and European networks and umbrellas earlier than most other parts of civil society and they are front-runners of enlargement by integrating and supporting Youth NGOs from the applicants countries. Yet their existence remains undervalued and under-recognised by the institutions. While for example the White Paper on youth mentions the European Youth Forum and National Youth Councils it remains mute on the role of European and international networks of youth organisations (in the youth sector commonly referred to as International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations - INGYOs)⁹. This is surprising because they have been playing an important role in the development and implementation of the Community actions for youth and their establishment as European organisations was supported by the EU. Trans-national youth NGOs provide many of the very limited opportunities for young people to acquire international experience, to co-operate and to take part in the construction of Europe and in overcoming national and cultural boundaries and stereotypes.

Non-governmental organisations in general address social, political, environmental, or humanitarian questions and provide answers and services related to these issues which public policy, for various reasons, may not address in a similar manner. Non-governmental organisations are formed by citizens because they feel responsible for the community, for the world, in which they live, and because they want to address these issues jointly with others. Youth NGOs exist for similar reasons, and similarly contribute to society and to the democratic expression of interests and convictions. The specific, added value of youth organisations – be it on local, regional, national or European level – lies in them being spaces that young people can define for themselves through participatory and democratic interaction. Thereby youth NGOs are social agents that empower young people, they are environments for non-formal learning and are specifically suitable for young people to learn democratic decision-making, intercultural understanding, self-motivated learning, project management, conflict resolution, organisational skills and more.

For International Youth NGOs it is worrying that often it seems not to be understood that they are bottom-up organisations with a wide, network-type membership on the local, regional and national level and a lean if not weak structure on European or international level. The grants provided by budget line A-3029 are in the range of 5 000 to 25 000 Euro, which helps to maintain offices at European level for networks which are made up of thousands, often tens or hundreds of thousands and in some cases even millions of young people. Furthermore, it must be taken into account that size of membership is not the only indication of meaningful representation. The fact that many youth NGOs are built upon long-term commitments to young people at a grass-roots level, means that they can bring a deep and vital knowledge of the situations and aspirations of their young members to national and European debate. Many youth NGOs also offer important expertise in specific fields, due to their particular experience and working context. It seems clear to us that if the EU really wants to strengthen its links with its young citizens it should help to strengthen these NGOs, making their work more effective, sustainable and valorised. Thus more fully engaging the millions of young people these organisations could potentially bring closer to Europe. For the

⁹ a fact that was noted with regret both by the European Parliament (PE 312.504) and the Economic and Social Committee (SOC/094 of 2002) in their reports on the White Paper.

credibility of the EU and its will to engage the citizens – present and future generations – it is paramount that it recognises the channels that do exist. Channels of communication and interaction from the citizens to the European institutions, and vice-versa. NGOs should not be seen primarily as functional to public policy but rather as an expression of active citizenship, which is necessary to sustain democracy and to enhance participation. Furthermore, at the same time their right to take autonomous decisions should be recognised.

The criteria for support to youth NGOs by the EU:

The Call for A-3029 currently does not seem to fully recognise youth organisations as self-defined arenas for young people's active citizenship. The Eligibility criteria of the current call¹⁰ describe international youth organisations rather as service providers and the young people "as their main beneficiaries".

- Due to the very limited funds available these should be prioritised for the support of international organisations which represent NGOs that actively encourage the participation of young people in all aspects of their activities and structures, including staff and decision making bodies, rather than organisations that see young people as clients. We recall that the European Parliament resolution which was at the origin of budget line A-3029 called for the direct and increased support of "associations of young people" (rather than organisations merely benefiting young people).
- The Commission should continue to support a wide variety of youth NGOs – small as well as bigger organisations – thus contributing to the plurality of European civil society and the diversity of opportunities for young people to participate. In this light, clear guidelines regarding the criteria for support of youth organisations should be defined with the active involvement of the concerned organisations.
- The Youth Forum welcomes that the Commission stresses the organisations' role in terms of "education, the promotion and development of European ideal among young people and helping young people to play an active part in European civil society". The specific value of youth organisations and their activities should be seen in them providing these opportunities for young people outside of formal educational structures, on a voluntary and experiential basis.
- The Youth Forum believes that support should be given primarily to organisations that are membership-based inclusive NGOs which work for the empowerment and development of young people regardless of their status, and organisations which represent a large proportion of youth population.

10 OJ C 352/6, 12.12.2001

The Future of Funding for Youth NGOs

The Laeken Declaration recognised that the EU faces a particular challenge of bringing the young citizens closer to Europe. The White Paper on governance underlined the role of NGOs at European level in democratic governance and the White Paper on youth identified participation as a key objective of EU action for young people. Both the European Parliament's and the Economic and Social Committee's report have underlined the under-explored potential of International Youth NGOs (INGYOs) in that respect.

Given the specific nature and challenges that youth organisations face and taking into account the political context, the Youth Forum believes that:

- In 2003, grants provided by the EU to International Non-Governmental Youth NGOs (INGYOs) should at least amount to 10 000 Euro per organisation and provide an average support of 20 000 Euro in order to be effective and proportionate to the considerable work input on the side of the applicants and the Commission. The budget line A-3029 should therefore be raised to 2 million Euro in the 2003 budget.
- The European Commission should take the initiative to establish a specific legal base for a programme in support of youth organisations on European level, to replace the support currently provided by the A-30 lines of the EU Budget from 2004 onwards and to enhance youth participation at European level. This programme should be allocated a minimum of 5 million Euro per year (and cover both the support for INGYOs and the Youth Forum).
- European Parliament should support such an initiative based on its long-standing commitment to youth associations and recent positions adopted in the context of the White Paper process and the reform of European Governance.
- The Council should fully support such an initiative, following the positions taken in the recent Council resolutions (see p. 4).
- The European Convention should include in its draft of the EU's future fundamental treaty an article that recognises the freedom of association in an affirmative manner and acknowledges the role of civic organisations in the construction of a more democratic and participatory European Union. It should also provide for a treaty article that strengthens the role of European co-operation in transnational youth work, in the framework of the democratic institutions of the EU.

RELIABLE SUPPORT FOR SUSTAINABLE CIVIL SOCIETY

The will to support non-governmental organisations has been put into questions at various times and for various reasons. At the moment, two questions related to NGO funding are particularly pertinent and a cause of concern. One is the revision of the Financial Regulation undertaken by the European Commission and the apparent intention to continuously reduce the support to European level NGOs if not to completely phase it out. Secondly, there are discussions going on whether support to NGOs should be given primarily or solely as start-up grants. Both issues are a threat to the existence of youth and other NGOs and put into question the possibilities for the articulation of the citizens interests at a European level, at least in cases where these interests are not economic and therefore find it difficult to raise sufficient resources on their own.

Building a European Civil Society requires a lasting commitment. Creating organisations has little sense without providing conditions for their sustainable viability. Decreasing grants annually does not contribute to reinforcing European civil society and it would further weaken the links between the European Union and its citizens. Not to provide sustained support to NGOs would also mean to waste experience and knowledge that has been build up in organisations over years; from a tax payer's point of view it would mean destroying the investment of public funds allocated in the past. Only by sustaining the support to civil society organisations can their experience and achievements be valorised and passed on. Giving grants for starting-up organisations without supporting existing ones and ensuring a sustainable follow-up for new ones is like building annexes to a house which is partly left to fall into ruin.

For youth NGOs the sustainability of their structures is a particularly crucial question, as membership, volunteers and staff have – due to the very nature of youth organisations – a high turnover rate. Additionally, more than other voluntary organisations youth NGOs rely on volunteers with little prior experience when they come into the organisation. Furthermore Youth NGOs involve a section of society with little own income which impacts on the organisations' possibility to raise money from their constituency. These challenges are set against a background of a difficult funding situation for most international youth organisations, resulting in these organisations being chronically under-staffed and often lacking appropriate equipment. The current funding situation of youth NGOs implies that many exist on a "from hand to mouth" basis. EU funding for International Youth NGOs therefore should be available and accessible for the purpose of both creating new youth organisations and for maintaining and developing the network and structures of existing ones. Additionally the funding available today is lower in real terms than it was in the mid-nineties. Commission and Parliament should therefore increase the funding for INGyOs considerably.

Financial Regulation & Vademecum on Grants:

Allowing reliable support for a sustainable Civil Society

- The Youth Forum notes with concern the Commission's amended proposal for a Council Regulation on the Financial Regulation¹¹, namely its Art. 112. 2 (Art. 106 of the initial proposal), which establishes that operational support to NGOs shall be decreasing. The Youth Forum regrets that the Commission has not followed the Opinion of the European Parliament, which requested the deletion of this paragraph. It calls on the Commission to give a clear yet wide interpretation of what is to be considered to be an "objective of general European interest" in the implementing instruments, thereby taking into account the objective of creating a *Citizens Europe*.
- Supporting the associations of young people at European level must be considered as of general European interest. Decreasing grants annually will not contribute to reinforcing European civil society and would weaken the links between the European Union and its citizens.
- A-3029 or any other future funding mechanism replacing A-3029 should not be considered to fall under Art. 6.3.6 ("Start-up grants and three-year limit for a single beneficiary") of the Commission's "Vademecum on Grant Management" (Version August 2000). Budget line A-3029 was created following a report and resolution of the European Parliament on "Community policies and their impact on youth"¹². This very foundation of the budget line does not support the interpretation of it being meant exclusively or primarily a start-up line.
- The Vademecum should be revised as its current formulation regarding annual grants is ambiguous, its application very open to discretion and, if applied restrictively it practically excludes "start-ups" from all running costs grants after the lapse of three years. The European Parliament should be consulted on the Vademecum so as to ensure its coherency with budgetary comments.
- The awarding of grants should to a greater extent take into account the contribution of voluntary work in order not to penalise NGOs which, as is the case for youth NGOs, rely to a greater extent on the - socially and politically - desirable contribution of volunteers.
- While it should by no means be limited to it, a future EU funding programme for youth NGOs should foresee mechanisms to support the creation of youth NGOs at European level (start-up grants), for which the requirements should be less strict than for established organisations. It is crucial however that these organisations continue to receive adequate support after the start-up phase.

11 COM 2001 – 691final 2
12 OJ C 183/469, 15.7.1991